Codes and Conventions

Codes and conventions are the familiar and predictable forms and techniques used by the media to communicate certain ideas, or to convey a desired impression. For example, a TV news anchor usually sits behind a big desk and looks directly at the camera while reading the news, which creates an impression of authority. In a horror film, the dark, deserted setting and threatening music warn the viewer that disaster is coming.

Normally, we understand these codes without being conscious of them. **Technical codes** include camera angles, sound and lighting. **Symbolic codes** include the language, dress, and actions of characters, such as using a clenched fist to portray anger. Part of being media literate is being aware of these techniques and recognizing the effects they are intended to have.

Answer the following questions to help you identify some of the codes and conventions used by the media:

* In a TV show, the camera moves in for a close-up of a man and a woman. The lighting is dim and the music is soft and slow. What do you think the scene is about?
* In action movies, how can you tell the bad guys from the good guys?
* What is the usual setting for family sitcoms on TV?
* In the music industry, how can you tell a heavy metal fan from a country music fan?
* According to the ads on TV, what kind of person eats Pizza Pockets?

In groups, list some codes and conventions that are used in the following media texts:

* Soap operas
* Horror films
* Rap music
* Pop music CD covers
* Toys for girls
* Toys for boys

Compare your list with another group’s.

GENRE

One example of how codes and conventions are used can be found in the familiar formulas used to create a wide variety of feature films (similar conventions are used in TV, advertising, radio, video games, print and other media). Most of us have favourite types of films that we enjoy watching more than others (some folks like romantic comedies, others like horror films). These film types are called “genres”. A genre is a category or form in which the subject matter, theme, and techniques are similar to other films of the same type. We recognize a genre because the characters, stories, and situations are so familiar. Most films fit a particular genre or formula so that audiences know in advance what to expect. Here is a list of several popular genres:

**Family films**: The story will focus on the relationships and conflicts in a family, and will avoid serious violence and strong language

**Science Fiction films**: These films are usually set in the future and will include conflict with alien creatures and plenty of special effects.

**Horror films:** Thrillers are often about ordinary people caught up in extraordinary events. Films that frighten the audience are so popular that film-makers have produced many sub-genres, or specialized forms of horror films, such as “monster” films, supernatural horror and criminal/psychological horror.

**Westerns:** These usually show a conflict between good and evil in the “wild” west, and feature simple, stock characters, sweeping landscapes, frontier towns, and gunfights.

This is not all the types of films there are. Inventive filmmakers also create new genres, or genre busters, by making films that do not follow the expectations of a familiar genre, or that combine the elements of more than one genre. For example, the *Aliens* series of movies combines science fiction and horror.